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SUBJECT: TAJIK GOVT CLOSES UNREGISTERED MOSQUES

¶1. (U) Local police closed down an unregistered mosque in Zarafshon neighborhood in Dushanbe July 26. Embassy staff witnessed the closure of one mosque as authorities locked the mosque's doors, prohibiting people from worshipping and angering the local community. Police continued to patrol the neighborhood in the evening, watching out for potential trouble. The mosque is located in a residential area less than one kilometer from the Embassy and on any day, approximately 30 to 100 people pray there.

¶2. (U) A former Imam of a Sino District mosque told a local staff member who is active in Tajikistan's Muslim community that as Sino District officials were attempting to close a mosque they explained to the community that on July 23 Dushanbe's Mayor Ubaidulloyev ordered local neighborhood authorities to shut down 80 known unregistered places of worship by the end of the week. The order has so far prompted at least 20 confirmed mosque closures and one imam believes the number is closer to 80. Technically the Zarafshon mosque is unregistered, but local men have been praying at the mosque for seven years. Mullah Sirojiddin, the Imam of the Zarafshon mosque who has led prayers for the past three years, is convinced that authorities targeted his mosque because he openly delivers sermons critical of the government.

¶3. (SBU) In an act of defiance, approximately 35 local worshippers prayed outside the Zarafshon mosque after it was closed July 26. Some worshippers suggested protesting by praying out on the street and blocking traffic, and others wanted to break the lock and reclaim the mosque. Mullah Sirojiddin told our staff member he rejected these means of protest and will take legal measures to re-open the mosque. Per current legislation, the Imam plans to collect ten signatures of district worshippers and apply to register his mosque. The registration process is supposed to take one to three months, if an applicant has presented all necessary documentation. Mullah Sirojiddin doubts that even by following the proper procedures that his mosque will actually be registered.

¶4. (SBU) COMMENT: Undoubtedly, the Zarafshon mosque and any of the other closed mosques will face bureaucratic hurdles in their attempts to register. If the issue were simply an administrative registration matter, we do not believe the city government would have used such a large display of authority to close down the mosques. Instead the forceful tactics used to lock the doors and patrol the area show that the government does not want local residents to pray at the mosque or listen to the Imam's sermons. As the Zarafshon residents have shown, authorities may close mosques, but people will still find a way to gather for religious worship or dialogue. The government may

defend its actions by claiming that it is trying to prevent religious extremism in Tajikistan, but its harassment of Christian groups as well indicates that it aims to control all religious practices and activity. END COMMENT.

JACOBSON